

Today I want to say a few things about deconstruction then offer a preview of 4 session class that begins Jan 23 in our after-church segment, once a month. It's called "Re-Orienting Faith" and the material is designed to be helpful for those of us in a process of reconsidering, re-thinking, versions of Christianity that no longer work for us. You can put your email in the chat or email it to me, and we'll add you the class email group—to give you more info.

Deconstruction is the most common term for this—refers taking things apart so you can examine the foundations and, if you choose, build back better. In so many realms of learning we begin with a settled perspective (often received from trusted authorities) then new experience leads us into a time of disorientation, and eventually a new orientation.

We tend to think of deconstruction as a very modern phenomenon, but it's age-old. Been reading a scholarly book on Hillel & Jesus—the leading figures of the biggest transition in ancient Judaism, the years leading up to the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. Jesus we know about.

They were contemporaries. Hillel died before Jesus made his mark, so it's likely Jesus was influenced by Hillel. Our information about Jesus may be more historically reliable because his teachings were written down sooner than is the case with Hillel—decades compared to 200 years. But both are very important figures: Jesus as the founder of what became known as Christianity and Hillel as the most-quoted rabbi of what became rabbinic Judaism with its major branches: orthodox, conservative, reform, restorationist. Our host congregation, TBE is Reformed congregation, part of broad tradition known as rabbinic Judaism.

But here's the thing for topic today: This book on Hillel & Jesus (Charlesworth & Johns) describes Israel during the time of Hillel and Jesus as in a major transition period marked by a profound religious identity crisis—one that at least rivals the identity crisis in American Christianity today, which is saying a lot.

Hillel & Jesus were teaching in the context of two major trends: on the one hand, greater standardization & definition (first liturgies for synagogue worship appear, the list of writings considered sacred and normative are forming). You could call this a trend toward greater rigidity. It was a response to several factors, but one of them looks very much like widespread deconstruction of the faith of ancient Israel. The temple, a great unifying force in Israel, was widely regarded as corrupt—the community that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls, refused to worship in the temple as a protest. Jesus performed a prophetic protest against temple corruption it seems, even while he and his followers worshipped in the temple. But the even more telling sign of deconstruction, had to do with a practice called *epispasm*, or circumcision-reversal surgery. You heard that right, circumcision-reversal surgery.

Here's how my Hillel & Jesus book scholars, describe this period: "Many Jewish males were embarrassed by the traditions that had galvanized society and defined their fathers and grandfathers.

Some, perhaps many underwent epispasm and removed the mark of circumcision.” Paul refers to epispasm in 1 Cor. 7:18, (using David Bentley Hart translation, which is more graphic): **“Let no one who was circumcised when he was called have it covered over by stretching”** [fn: a painful operation undergone by some Hellenized Jews who wanted to hide their circumcision which was apparently regarded as an unseemly form of self-exposure so that they could participate in nude athletic contests, public exercise of public bathing.] Remember Jerusalem was a major cosmopolitan center with Roman, Greek, Persian influences. Story of the wise men journeying from the East is but one example of this. So the people of Judah in the South (Jerusalem) and Northern Israel (Samaria-Galilee) were not in some monoculture—they were exposed to many different cultures.

Widespread corruption in one’s own religious tradition combined with exposure to other traditions can be deeply disorienting. It leads very different responses: efforts to crack down, circle wagons, impose definition, or serious efforts to reform from within a tradition, or leaving the tradition behind. All three responses indicate a time of great disorientation. The fact that many Jewish males of that period were so conflicted about their religious identity that they were undergoing a surgical procedure (before the age of anesthesia) to reverse circumcision, that’s saying something. Both Hillel and Jesus were remaining within the tradition, not leaving it, but they were both advocating significant reforms. Both were also popular with the segment of Israel’s population most engaged with deconstruction. This is an ancient, not just a modern phenomenon. When our sense of history is short-sighted everything feels unprecedented, and that only makes it scarier. So I found this scholarship consoling.

Back to the present. Living in a time of such intense religious identity conflict or tumult is exciting and challenging at the same time. We feel the challenge part in different ways. Given my age, gender, demographic and job title, it’s easy for people who don’t know me might associate me with some of the most toxic things going on in the world today: so much that passes for Christianity is actually fueling the rise of white supremacy, fueling efforts to control women, rise of authoritarianism, threats to democracy, impeding efforts to deal with climate change, mistreatment of minorities. That’s the challenging part. But it’s also exciting to be part of the change, to be part of reforming, and reformulating something as important as a religious tradition.

One last thing before a quick preview of the class. Terms like deconstruction or disorientation express how jarring it can feel to lose your bearings when a previously-held belief proves inadequate ... or even harmful. I know the word trauma can be trivialized. Discomfort isn’t trauma. Distress isn’t trauma. Trauma is a sign of serious injury. Still, religious trauma is a real thing. I remember the first time I entered a worship space that reminded me of a church experience that was very painful. Just because of the physical cues (chairs, layout, carpeting) my body was protesting, light-headed, sweaty palms, I had to leave. I think my experience of religious trauma is pretty mild compared to many, but even a mild taste gives you a sober appreciation for the phenomena.

That’s why I wanted to offer a little preview today of the material we’ll cover over five sessions in this class. So you can decide for yourself what, if anything, might be helpful. One thing I want to stress is

that it's really more like 4 offerings rather than a class. So I hope everyone feels free to just dip in for the topic that interest you and that you feel ready to engage.

Going through deconstruction or disorientation to a new construction or a new orientation, is not some smooth linear process: step 1, step 2, step 3. It's more like having a tangled, knotted up ball of yarn-like earpods before airpods, the ones that get hopeless tangled up in your backpack. In the case of the knotted ball of string or yarn—we usually look the thing tangled mess over, feel defeated, but then notice one little portion that seems loose, and we gently loosen it further. If we pull too hard, we can just tighten the knots rather than loosen them. So we loosen a little here and that opens up a spot to loosen a little there.

No two tangled balls of yarn or string or knotted up earpods are alike. Like a no Rubik's cube randomly disorganized waiting to be solved is alike. So I can't just watch you solve your Rubik's cube and follow you step-by-step, since mine is in a different configuration. You can give me some tips is all, but I have to figure it.

I picked out 4 topics that I thought had a good shot at being helpful. I have a friend, Fayeannette who comes to our Tuesday Teatime, and she has alerted me to four as a sacred number, which it is in in her tradition. So I'm looking for fours these days: what four topics—not 12, not 7, not 3, but 4 —N-S-E-W; up-down-left-right—maybe 4 is a good number for getting our bearings, I don't know, but at least it's a manageable number.

Session 1: Jan. 23. Review four different roadmaps offered to orient people in the process of deconstruction. Richard Rohr has a simple one: first half of life, second half of life. Brian McLaren has another: Simplicity, Complexity, Perplexity, Harmony. I've mentioned orientation, disorientation, new orientation. Phyllis Tickle offers an historical roadmap: her idea that every 500 years major religious traditions, including Christianity, go through a major reset: an every-500-year rummage sale (that starts with you rummaging in your basement seeing what you want to sell in the rummage sale.)

When we've lost our bearings, we sometimes don't know where we are in any bigger picture. In the shopping malls that are confusingly laid out, they have these maps and helpfully the maps have a prominent arrow: you are here. One or another of these maps might help you situation yourself, Oh, I'm here—now where do I want to go?

Second 2 in February: How the Hell Doctrine Developed. The doctrine of Hell as it's presented in Modern Western (European) Christianity [Catholics, Protestant, especially evangelical] defines hell as an afterlife of eternal conscious torment for those kept out of the presence of God. In fact, this notion comes relatively late in church history. And man does it ramp up the psychological pressure and that pressure is used to control people. Paul, author of roughly a third of the NT says nothing about hell. A very prominent early theologian (born 184), Origen of Alexandria taught universal salvation. Lots of English translations put the word hell in Jesus' mouth on 7 distinct occasions. In each case, the original word is either Hades (a very ill-defined state after death, not the same as Hell) or Gehenna, an actual

location outside of Jerusalem used as a smoldering landfill. It's clearly metaphor, and not one that fits well with permanence or eternal conscious torment. The context of these sayings is warnings to leaders abusing their power, not talks at Young Life Weekends for Junior High students.

Session 3 in March: Offers and older Jewish approach to sacred Scripture that sees these writings as multi-vocal (speaking with many different voices, some of which are in conflict each other) rather than uni-vocal (the idea that Scripture speaks with one voice) When someone says "The Bible says ..." they are assuming Scripture is univocal, not multivocal. This is a huge difference in practice. If the writers of these writings agreed and disagreed with each other, well then we can agree and disagree with them. This idea that there is a "high view" of Scripture and a "low view" is the invention of those who buy the univocal approach.

Session 4: Religious Distortions of Sexuality that Infected Early Christianity. The focus here isn't on LGBTQ issues pers se, but on sexuality and Christianity in general. It's a look at ancient Jewish concerns over sexuality and also how from early on, the Jesus movement, especially as it abandoned its Jewish origins, fell into the hands of some teachers with some very negative and toxic views of human sexuality.

You can see how each of issues might inform each other, such that if you loosen up any one knot, it can help you loosen up the others. If you're up for all four topics, that's fine. But maybe you just want to dip into the class for one or two of those topics, that's fine too.